

Mr. GORTON. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to speak for 5 minutes in the morning business.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

INNOVATION IN EDUCATION

Mr. GORTON. Mr. President, the Washington Post printed an article last Sunday about a group of WWII veterans returning to the beaches of Normandy to share stories and remember fallen brothers. It was yet another reminder of the closing window of opportunity historians have to glean firsthand accounts from the generation of men and women who lived through the Great Depression, fought in WWII and came back to build America into the greatest power of health and wealth in the world.

The Washington Post wrote: "World War II veterans are dying at a rate of more than 1,000 a day. 'It's the equivalent to a library burning down every day,' said National Guard Maj. Gen. Gene Krase."

This week I'm presenting my Innovation in Education award to a group of students and educators in Wenatchee, Washington who are working to preserve the oral testimonies and firsthand accounts of the men and women who make up what some have called our greatest generation.

Allison Agnew's 11th grade Honors English class at Eastmont High School began the Honor By Listening program last year, which pairs each student with an elder in the Wenatchee valley to document his or her personal history. After the student recorded and transcribed oral testimonies, they wrote out each story in narrative form.

Businesses and leaders in the community support the process. Representatives from the North Central Washington Museum gave the students lessons on interviewing techniques and how to transcribe oral histories. Local librarians, attorneys, and business leaders joined educators to help the students edit their narratives. Materials and funds for publishing the final product came through donations from local businesses. It was a marvelous community effort.

Incidentally, one of my own staff members, Don Moos, has volunteered countless hours of his time to help connect students with potential interviewees. Don himself is a veteran who fought in the European theater during World War II. In fact, he won a Purple Heart in the Battle of the Bulge, but I have yet to hear his whole story though we have been friends for years. I look forward to reading about his experiences.

This year the junior class at Eastmont will continue the program. It already has obtained a list of 200 possible candidates to interview this fall.

I am proud of the efforts these students are putting forth to not only learn about, but to preserve, the rich heritage of Washington State. It is ef-

forts like these that convince me I am heading in the right direction with my Straight A's bill. If we give educators the freedom and flexibility to meet the unique needs of their students, while providing them with a system of accountability for the results, we will see more innovative programs like this one.

Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative assistant proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. CONRAD. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

THE VA-HUD APPROPRIATIONS BILL

Mr. CONRAD. Mr. President, last Friday, the Senate passed the VA-HUD appropriations bill. I first want to commend the chairman and ranking member of that subcommittee for the superb job they did in managing that legislation as it went through the Senate.

I do want to indicate a concern about what was missing in that bill because there is one program that was not funded which I believe is very important to the country, certainly to my State, which is the Community Builders Program. It is my hope that this problem can be corrected in the conference committee. I asked the chairman and the ranking member of the VA-HUD appropriations subcommittee to pay special attention to attempting to provide the resources necessary to keep the Community Builders Program going.

Despite HUD's successful efforts to reduce staff and provide better service, the committee bill will result in the termination of more than 400 community builders across the country. That is a program that is working. This program is designed to bring new blood into that agency. It has been called a prototype for the new type of public servant in the 21st century. HUD, in recruiting for those 400 positions, had over 9,000 applications, including lawyers, academics, and economic and community development experts. These are people who were asked to come and give 2 years to helping revitalize HUD. We signed them up. We recruited them. We signed contracts with them, and now we tell them, sorry, we have changed our minds—even though the program is working. I don't think so.

The individuals who were selected to participate in community builders are experts in community outreach and development, who agreed to a 2-year term of service with HUD. They don't sit at a desk in Washington. They work in the 81 field offices doing face to face contact with people in the communities in which they serve. This is a program that has received accolades

from every independent source that has looked at the program, including evaluations conducted by Booz, Allen & Hamilton, the respected private firm, PricewaterhouseCoopers, one of the major accounting firms in the country, and the public strategies group—all who made independent reviews of the Community Builders Program and all of whom said it was a significant improvement for HUD.

If the community builders are now eliminated, some HUD field offices will drop below the minimum staffing level and will have to close. That includes the only office in my State. We have only one and it is going to close. Some people say: North Dakota is a small State, a rural State, you don't have many housing problems. Well, I can tell you that is not the case. We do have serious housing problems. Go to the Indian reservations in my State and you will see housing problems that are enormously serious.

But more than that, when disaster strikes, HUD is absolutely critical. We saw that in 1997 when the flooding disasters hit eastern North Dakota. Let me say that HUD's presence in the State was critically important to the recovery in North Dakota. Secretary Cuomo, in particular, was absolutely superb in his response to the crisis. He understood the very human impact this devastating flood was having on the people of Grand Forks and the people of eastern North Dakota, and he responded. He went out of his way to make certain that HUD's response took into account the unique circumstances of this event.

Rarely have I seen public servants respond in the way we saw in the 1997 flood disaster in North Dakota. I have heard lots of criticisms of HUD over the years, but I can tell you firsthand that their response was extraordinary, and I will never forget it.

Let me give one example. After the disaster bill passed Congress, top HUD staff, including the Secretary, stayed and worked all weekend at HUD headquarters in order to get the money out to North Dakota. That is a level of commitment we rarely see. They were there Saturday, Sunday, from morning until night, to get the money flowing. Indeed, we were able to get \$50 million into the hands of the Grand Forks community within 48 hours after the legislation passed. That is the kind of performance one would like to see from public servants on a routine basis. That is what we saw from HUD. They delivered, and they delivered in a way I think makes us all proud.

Because of HUD's quick work, Secretary Cuomo was able to provide that \$50 million in disaster recovery funds to the city to meet the immediate needs shortly after the bill was signed by the President. Without those funds and the dedicated work of countless HUD staff, Grand Forks would not have been able to recover from that devastating flood. I toured Grand Forks with the head of FEMA, James Lee

Witt. We were there during the August break, and we saw the resurgence of that community. It is remarkable. This is a town where more than 90 percent of the homes were affected by flood. This is a community that was also hit before the floods by the worst winter storm in 50 years. Then the floods came. In the midst of floods came fire. It was an extraordinary series of events, but there was also an extraordinary Federal response, and I am here today to thank my colleagues who stepped forward and were willing to assist. But I also want to recognize the extraordinary work of HUD, and specifically Secretary Cuomo, because rarely have I seen the kind of response we saw during our period of crisis. In part, it was because he had this new mechanism, these community builders across the country who were infusing new energy and new ideas into the agency that made that response possible.

In Washington, we hear over and over that government needs to be more responsive to people's needs and that government needs to be more flexible and work similar to the private sector. I can say that in Grand Forks, HUD did just that. Grand Forks is not an isolated example. We saw it up and down the Red River Valley. It wasn't just in Grand Forks; it was in Fargo; it was in Wahpeton; it was in Grafton; it was in Menoken. Town after town that was threatened had a full Federal response, and no agency was more responsive than HUD; no people were more helpful than those community builders.

That is why I thought it important to come to the floor and say restore the Community Builders Program, restore it in the conference committee. Let's not recruit some of the top people from all across the country, asking them to serve for 2 years, and then, after a year in a program that has been deemed successful by every independent entity that has examined the program, say to them: Forget it; go home.

The amazing thing is, they won't go home because we have signed contracts with them. If we don't fund it, we are still going to have to pay for those positions.

I hope very much the conference committee will restore the funding to the Community Builders Program, to say to those 400 people who have given so much, we recognize their contribution; we intend to keep them as part of a new HUD, a HUD that has been reformed, a HUD that is responding in a splendid way to disasters such as the one we faced in North Dakota.

Mr. DORGAN. Will the Senator yield?

Mr. CONRAD. I am happy to yield to the Senator.

Mr. DORGAN. Mr. President, I was pleased to hear the remarks of Senator CONRAD about the Community Builders Program at HUD. I echo all of the comments he made about the difference that HUD made in the lives of the peo-

ple in the Red River Valley who suffered so immensely from the massive flooding that occurred a couple of years ago.

I am on the Senate Appropriations Committee, and we had a discussion about the Community Builders Program. I share the feeling Senator CONRAD has expressed on the floor of the Senate about that program. It seems to me we ought to find a way to continue to fund that program. These are people all across this country who are making a difference, men and women who give new energy and new vitality to the Department of Housing and Urban Development. I think it is a step backward for this Congress to say that program doesn't work. We know it works. We know firsthand its value. We understand its contribution in our communities and other communities across this country.

I placed a statement in the RECORD a couple of days ago about this subject. I was pleased to have my colleague describe this in more detail, its functioning in the context of what we experienced.

I ask the Senator if he doesn't believe, in the end process, in the overall scheme of the amount of money that is spent and invested by the Congress, if the funding for the Community Builders isn't almost an asterisk of an amount, but so significant in terms of what it means to the new direction in HUD and to the capability of HUD to provide new energy and new vitality to these programs. Is it not the case that funding for this program can be done easily, without cost to other programs, but in a way that will make it an incredibly important investment in HUD in the long term?

Mr. CONRAD. The Senator is exactly right. I think back to the time when we were in the midst of that crisis and what a splendid response we got from HUD.

I think people are often critical of Federal agencies. Certainly HUD, especially in the past, has received lots of criticism—well deserved, unfortunately. However, this new Secretary, Mr. Cuomo, has done a remarkable job of transforming that agency. We saw it firsthand in the flood disaster of 1997. Not only did they stay in all weekend down at HUD to get the money out to the affected communities, which was a splendid performance, but they were with us every step of the way in revitalizing and rebuilding that community.

We have just seen the result. The Senator from North Dakota was with me and with James Lee Witt as we toured Grand Forks to see how that community is coming back. It would not have happened, the mayor of Grand Rapids said to me when we were at the League of Cities meeting Saturday night in North Dakota, without the assistance from the Federal Government that was received by the community of Grand Forks.

The key agencies were obviously FEMA and HUD, also SBA. All of those

were major contributors, as well as the Commerce Department and EDA. Those four agencies made a profound difference. The mayor said to me flatly, without the contribution made by HUD and Secretary Cuomo, that town would not have come back in the way it has in just this short period.

It is truly amazing to drive through the streets of Grand Forks now, to see the schools that have been rebuilt, to see the downtown that is under construction—a new corporate center, a new county facility—to see other buildings that are being rehabilitated, to drive through the neighborhoods and see the new homes that have been constructed, hundreds of new homes, to see the devastated homes that have been taken out, to see the new greenway that is being created, and to go across the river and see a brand new superstore that is being built and will attract hundreds of thousands of people a year. This is a testimony to programs that work.

We all know there are Federal programs that don't work. We all know there are times when Federal money is not well spent. This is an example of when the Federal Government proved its worth and proved its mettle, performed, and made a difference in the lives of tens of thousands of people.

I want to publicly commend Secretary Cuomo and the people at HUD and to say this Community Builders Program ought not to be thrown over the side. We have 400 people who were recruited from 9,000 who applied to come to work for the Government for 2 years—in and out—to add their expertise and energy. We ought to continue the experiment. We know from every independent analysis this is a program that has worked.

BUDGET SURPLUS

Mr. CONRAD. Today the Office of Management and Budget announced the unified budget is in surplus for fiscal year 1999 by at least \$115 billion. That is significantly higher than the unified surplus of \$70 billion for fiscal year 1998 and, in fact, is the largest dollar surplus in the history of the United States.

This is a good day. This is a good day for the country, and this is a good day for the Congress. It is certainly a good day for the President and the administration.

In 1992, the budget deficit was \$290 billion. The forecast then was that the deficit for this year would be over \$400 billion. That was the forecast in 1992 for where we were headed if we didn't change course. We did change course. The President proposed, and the Congress passed, a plan in 1993, a 5-year plan, that has worked splendidly. In each and every year of that 5-year plan, the deficit came down. In 1997, we passed a bipartisan addition to that plan. That addition closed the gap, made the difference, and finished the job. Now we can report we have budget surpluses.